

APPENDIX C6

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Section: Life At Home

BREW-BY-CUP COFFEE MAKERS FAIL TASTE TEST

Joe Yonan, Globe Staff

The concept of brew-by-cup coffee makers first took hold in offices, where it makes perfect sense: Why brew a whole pot of coffee for a dozen people with a dozen tastes?

It wasn't long before manufacturers realized that many modern homes are not so different. Mom may like her medium roast coffee perfumed with hazelnut, Dad might be more of a dark-roast-with-no-flavoring kind of guy, and their teenager might be rebelling by drinking - perish the thought - decaf.

Three companies started selling one-cup-at-a-time coffee makers this fall, and while each one has its pluses and minuses, they all work basically the same way: through the use of specially designed, disposable containers that are filled with just enough preground coffee for one cup. Turn the machine on long enough to heat its tank of water, pop in one of the containers, and press a button. Like an espresso machine, the machine shoots water through the container, which has a paper filter built in, and within a minute or two, you've got a hot cuppa joe.

"I think it's more than a trend," says Holly Smith-Berry, vice president of marketing at Salton, which is making the Melitta One: One Java Pod Coffee Maker. "It's really the next evolution in the way people drink their coffee."

Exactly which people, however, is the question. Smith-Berry and folks at Keurig and Flavia, the other two companies that launched brew-by-cup makers this fall, all say their target audience consists of coffee connoisseurs, and that one of the appeals of a brew-by-cup system is that it makes a perfect cup each time. With a whole pot, they say, the coffee's flavor begins to degrade after a matter of minutes.

That's certainly the case with glass-carafe makers that have the coffee sitting on a burner continuing to cook (read: burn) after the first cup is poured, but what about the system coffee purists like myself use: filtered water, freshly ground beans, and a thermal carafe? Ease aside, could these new machines compete?

I must admit some skepticism, borne of my bias against the move to automate everything, including a cup of coffee. Some of the best-tasting coffee in the world comes out of the simplest mechanisms, as the French press method shows so well. Nonetheless, I tried to banish any preconceptions and put the machines through their paces for a few weeks.

I immediately realized the appeal of a no-mess system. No scooping, no grinding, no pouring into a filter. My countertops have never been so clean. It's also handy that all three of the makers also can create a single cup of tea.

It wasn't long, though, before my biggest complaint about all three machines would surface: You can't use your own coffee in them. You must buy the manufacturer's special pods, packs, or cups. With Keurig and Flavia, that means ordering them by phone or online, while Melitta's are also available in a limited number of retail outlets.

That means that if you run out, there's no running to the corner 7-Eleven, or Starbucks, to pick up some beans. And the cost will add up, no doubt about it. A pound of loose beans will yield enough for about 36 cups, so for a \$10 pound that's about 28 cents a cup. Only the Melitta maker can match that cost, with 18 pods selling for \$5. With the other two models, the per-cup price ranges from about 37 cents for the cheapest Keurig pods to almost 56 cents for the Flavia packs.

My other main objection is the brew strength, or lack of it. With premeasured coffee, there's no controlling how strong it is, and for somebody like me who likes it black as night (and then lightens it with milk, no sugar), that's a deal breaker. The Melitta and Flavia models do allow for some strength adjustment by letting you brew a smaller cup with less water but the same amount of coffee. That's all well and good, but it means I had to run the thing twice, or even three times, to get a serviceable cup of coffee. These convenience-oriented machines weren't seeming so convenient anymore.

Then there's the taste. Keurig offers dozens of brands of coffee and teas made in its trademarked K-cup format, but even if you find your favorite, it simply isn't going to taste as robust as if you had ground the beans right before brewing. Neither do the coffees made with the Melitta and Flavia models. Some of the cups I tried out of these machines were better than others, but they were all plagued with a somewhat flat, even stale flavor.

Such a cup might be as good as I could get at the office, but at home, I expect better.

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PHOTO

One-cup machines by Melitta, Flavia, and Keurig have varying options and price ranges. , GLOBE STAFF PHOTO , LANE TURNER

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